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America's extremist center

Washington has become a city of barricades, a place where agents on rooftops scan the sky for missiles, and where metal detectors are turned so high they can find a nail in your shoe. It is a city of clearances, closed doors, need to know, a city that believes even Alice Rivlin should take a drug test.

Washington is a town that will host an August conference on "Special Tactics and Security" featuring "personal, tactical, and corrections body armor, hand-held shields, blankets, helmets, face shields, soft armor" and so forth.

Washington is where the idea developed that the rap of Sister Souljah might undermine our most precious values and that messages on the Internet were going to eat our children alive.

And Washington is the town that won't speak to you unless it knows "what it is in reference to," assumes you have a hidden agenda and demands to know "who you are with."

It is a bit odd that a place of such premonitions, predilections and obsessive precautions should come to believe that much of the rest of the country suffers from paranoia. But such is the eccentricity of the disordered mind that it sometimes assigns to others its own defects.

A psychiatrist has suggested that one useful way to judge such claims in individual cases is to count the bodies. Which is to say that healthy people don't leave a trail of victims as they go through life. On the other hand, the disordered, no matter how convincing their claim to normalcy, produce a wake that tells a different story.

A similar principle can be applied to politics. And when it is, a simple, stunning fact stands out: With few exceptions, the major threats to American democracy have come from neither right nor left but from the center.

From that internecine struggle of two factions of the American middle known as the Civil War to FBI assaults on activist organizations in the 60s and 70s, from the Palmer raids to Bill Clinton's anti-terrorism legislation, Americans have traditionally had more to fear from people they have elected than from those on the fringes of politics. In fact, the latter have often served largely as an excuse for the American center to tighten its grip on the political and economic system. This is not to say that the left and the right would not enjoy being just as violent and repressive given the chance, but the American center has rarely allowed that.

Even the KKK, so often cited as an example of the sort of threat the contemporary right poses, was powerful primarily because it was at the center, holding political and judicial and law enforcement office as well as hiding beneath its robes. In some towns, lynching parties were even announced in the local paper. And in the 1920s, both the Colorado governor and mayor of Denver were members of the Klan, the latter well enough regarded to have had Stapleton airport named after him.

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If we were going to worry, therefore, let's at least worry about the right thing. Let's, for example, count the bodies. The Vietnam War is a good place to start: nearly 60,000 Americans killed to test the conspiracy theory that if one country fell in Southeast Asia they all would. Or the paranoia about the civil rights and peace movement in this country during the 1960s that led the FBI to place tens of thousands of citizens under surveillance, including Caesar Chavez and Martin Luther King Jr. Or the 1969 memo from the agency's San Francisco field office that suggested the FBI use the women's movement as a wedge against the left. Or the 1970 memo that proposed to "disrupt and confuse" Black Panther activities. Or 1977 -- when the CIA told some 80 academic institutions that they had been unwittingly involved in the mind control research.

Meanwhile, what was happening on the fringes of American politics? One study of civil violence in the tumultuous years between 1963 and 1968 found just 220 deaths -- an overall rate due to civil strife less than one half that in Europe during the same period. Most of the victims, by the way, were inner city residents.

Are the days of state-sponsored violence gone forever? Not at all. Let's, for example, count the bodies in the War on Drugs -- a decade of violence dedicated to the proposition that human nature can be effectively outlawed. It is a fantasy as wild as anything contrived by the Michigan Militia, but empirically far more deadly. The Drug Policy Foundation estimates that drug war has cost five to six thousand deaths a year, enough over the past decade to equal American fatalities in Vietnam.

Now let's count the bodies wasted in order to combat another conspiracy theory, namely, that smoking a weed considerably milder than tobacco is a major threat to our society. This summer America celebrated its 10 millionth arrest on marijuana charges. Bill Clinton is even afraid to let pot be used for medical purposes.

What about arms stockpiles and the like? According to a Defense Department report last December, America's share of worldwide arms shipments has risen from slightly over 20% during the last years of the Cold War to more than 50% today. During the last decade of the 20th century -- as the nation occupies itself with Oklahoma City, Randy Weaver and Waco -- the US will sell over $150 billion worth of arms to other lands. Some undoubtedly will become part of what the US government will refer to as the international terrorist threat.

Hate groups? Name those that pose anywhere near the threat to American minorities as does the 104th Congress. And what about the "wanted" poster published by congressional Republicans that showed 28 targeted Democratic incumbents -- 80% of them black, latino, women or Jewish? Or the Good O'Boys Roundup, a festival for law enforcement personnel sponsored by agents of the BATF, which has included such things as signs saying NIGGER CHECKPOINT, T-shirts with a target superimposed over Martin Luther King's face, others

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showing DC police officers with a black man stretched across a car hood above the caption BOYZ ON THE HOOD, and cards labeled NIGGER HUNTING LICENSE?

Random acts of terror? They are a growing part of the police repertoire as domestic law enforcement and military tactics blend. The raids shown on TV programs like *Cops* are not designed merely to intimidate the criminal, but to convince whole communities -- whole ethnic and age groups -- of police invulnerability. They also teach police officers bad habits by providing dubious role models. Meanwhile, the centrist media shows minimal interest in whether such practices as jump-out squads, random roadblocks, arbitrary traffic stops and curfews are constitutional.

Garden variety paranoia? How about US Postal inspector Don Davis who was quoted in the *San Francisco Examiner* as saying of the Unabomber's questioning of technological society: "There are groups that adhere to a lot of these thoughts, expecially out of Berkeley." As Hank Chapot, a Green who ran for Berkeley city office, asked, "Is Mr. Davis talking about me?"

Good data on home-grown terrorism, meanwhile, is hard to come by. We do know that only 171 people were indicted in the US for "terrorism and related activities" during the 1980s. We find (using the BATF's own figures) that there were just 328 bombing deaths between 1989 and 1993. These bombings include everything from Mafia retribution, insurance cover-ups, apolitical acts of madness, to right-wing sabotage such as that directed against abortion clinics. In sum, fewer deaths in five years than the city of Washington loses to murder annually. Even the Oklahoma City incident barely undermines the comparison.

Three hundred people is, of course, too many to die for any reason. But it is also far too weak an argument for the end of democracy.

Hysteria hustling

The media could give some sense of scale to this business. But because it doesn't -- because, for example, it insists that we treat the Oklahoma City bombing as a pivotal event of our time -- we find ourselves bouncing from crisis wave to crisis wave, unable to gain an understanding of the underlying currents of history.

The media is more than willing to pump up the hysteria. The results, as in the Oklahoma City case, can be atrocious. The media watchdog, FAIR, recently cited a long list of those who leaped to the conclusion that the bombing might be the work of Arabs. Among them were the *New York Post, Christian Science Monitor, New York Times, Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post.* Also ABC, CBS, and CNN. Also columnists Georgie Anne Geyer, A.M. Rosenthal, Mike Royko, Jim Hoagland, as well as such predictable sources of anti-Arab sentiment as Steve Emerson and Daniel Pipes. Royko, for example, wrote in the *Chicago Tribune*:

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> I would have no objection if we picked out a country that is a likely suspect and bombed some oil fields, refineries, bridges, highways, industrial complexes . . If it happens to be the wrong country, well, too bad, but it's likely it did something to deserve it anyway.

When the first suspects turned out to come from the Mid-West rather than from the Mid-East, the *Chicago Sun-Times'* Richard Roeper responded, "Does that mean we conduct overnight bombings of Arizona and Kansas and Michigan now?"

After the anti-Arab paranoia was deflated by none other than the FBI, the demon vacuum for the center was quickly filled by the citizen militias. Even such normally sane voices as FAIR and the *Nation* began to crack with alarm. So agitated did the *Nation* become that several readers had to write and urge some perspective. Here are excerpts from two letters:

> Actually, but for the [militia's] confusion over the distinctions between socialism and fascism . . . many of their fears regarding the multinational corporations running the world are valid.

> Though we disagree on many issues, we as working people must still view the members and supporters of militias as working people who are victims of government repression merely reacting to this repression in their own way. To focus your fire on this right-wing fringe element and advocate government repression against them is to invite this same repression against ourselves somewhere down the road.

The most remarkable piece of hysteria-hustling, though, came in a June *New Yorker* article, by Michael Kelly. The article was called THE ROAD TO PARANOIA. Its subtitle: *There have always been radical fringes on both the left and the right which believe that the government conspires against the people. But lately the two have formed a strange alliance -- fusion paranoia -- that is reaching millions of disaffected Americans.*

To support this claim, Kelly provided, over 14 pages, the following number of major examples:

One.

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Isn't hysteria fun?

On May 11 the Marine Corps Combat Development Command directed officers to compile information on any support the Marines had provided to paramilitary groups or "organizations supporting such groups." The memo cited, among others, the Izaak Walton League.

Telling the tale of the confluence of a liberal and a Montanan right-winger, Kelly outdid Newt Gingrich in reliance on argument by anecdote, spinning for the *New Yorker's* chaise lounge potatoes a delicious conspiracy theory of mischief and paranoia among the hoi poloi.

Along the way, Kelly managed to extrapolate some conclusions that some might regard as, well, extreme. He implied, for example, that there isn't all that much difference between the "wise use" movement and radical environmentalists who "see the same corrupt conspiracy as the Wise Users, but in mirror image." Implicit in such an argument, of course, is the assumption that the sort of ad hoc and erratic environmental policies pursued by the Clinton administration represent a rational center from which fringes diverge. Another way to look at the matter, however, is that the Clinton approach is so intellectually vapid, that anyone -- whether on the right or left -- who actually has a view about such issues (rather than merely being interested in their immediate political impact) will find it wanting.

Kelly's grasp of such matters leaves much to be desired. For example, he seems to imply that the Wise Users are well represented by something called The Sahara Club USA, which believes in a conspiracy consisting of:

> New Age nuts, militant vegetarians, anti-gun pukes, animal rights goofballs, tree worshipers, new world order pushers, human haters, pro-socialists, doom-sayers, homosexual rights activists, radical eco-Nazis, slobbering political correctness advocates, militant feminists and land closure fascists.

In fact, far from being representative of the corporatist "wise use" movement, the Sahara Club USA, as journalist Husayn Al-Kurdi recently reported, consists of "a bunch of bikers who are mad because they can't have unrestricted access to the desert to practice their crudities."

Kelly, even as he speaks of paranoia, manages to lump together not only corporate suits and bikers, but Noam Chomsky and the John Birch Society, Ramsey Clark and Bo Gritz, and Timothy Leary and Lyndon LaRouche.

Here are some others that Kelly believes suffer from conspiratorial fantasies: moderate conservatives, liberals, feminists and African-Americans. Who then, besides Kelly himself, is finally left on the side of reason?

In the next paragraph, Kelly gives another list, this one a compilation of charges that have been made against the president, which he cites as an example of "the degree to which political paranoia has worked its way into the culture at large." These charges include the drug and gun smuggling activities at Mena, the murder of Vincent Foster; the murder or beatings of those threatening to expose his illegal activities as governor; the BCCI scandal; and the retention of an incompetent medical examiner to cover up a death caused by Clinton's mother.

By deftly blending the highly probable (a cover-up of CIA-assisted drug running at Mena) with the bizarre and unlikely (the incompetent medical examiner story) Kelly attempts, in best centrist fashion, to discredit *all* suspicions of the president. Such a technique eliminates the need to argue substantive questions such as: if it is all a paranoiac fantasy, what are more than fifty FBI agents doing in Little Rock? In the 1950s, there was a name for such skillfully sloppy associations. It was called McCarthyism.

In the end, Kelly's story is about the center and not about the left or right. It is one of the center's most notable defenses to date against the growing clamor of non-elite America for a share of power. It is about the paranoiac obsession of the American establishment to make sure (in its own phraseology) that the "center holds."

Kelly understands the stakes in all this; he describes fusion paranoids as believing that the government "is controlled by people acting in concert against the common good and at the bidding of powerful interests working behind the scenes." This elite is comprised of "the money-political-legal class, and the producers of news and entertainment in the mass media." In short the sort of people that Kelly and other Washington journalists hang out with and have come to accept as the model of normalcy.

As Kelly himself notes, the center's concern is not new. He quotes Richard Hofstadter's chestnut about the "paranoid style" of American politics, which Alexander Cockburn, in the *Nation*, describes as one

> in which the American lower orders -- including unions -- were dangerous, potential brownshirts restrained only by educated elites of mature judgment.
>
> In the fifties it was the elites of mature judgment who were prompting the CIA to destroy labor movements in the Third World and dislodge populist tribunes of the poor, by murder if necessary. In the nineties the elite increasingly detour democratic process by means of 'bipartisan commissions,' international 'agreements' fast-tracked through Congress, and the crude disenfranchisement of the poor, with 'law enforcement officials' turning growing numbers of them into felons denied the vote.

Ironically, if Kelly had only waited a week he might have had a better perspective on the sources of American violence and the cultural distribution of sanity. In the

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Talk about paranoid crazy

Danny Hashimoto, of the Boulder Patriots, even advocates the barter system exchanging goods and services with others directly -- *From a story on militias in* Psychology Today

same issue as his article was a review of the life of General Curtis LeMay, written by Richard Rhodes. LeMay ran the air war against both Japan and North Korea, became head of the sacrosanct Strategic Air Command and was one of the military heroes of his time.

Here are just a few of his accomplishments:

- The destruction of nearly 17 square miles of Tokyo with the loss of at least 100,000 civilian lives. The US Strategic Bombing Survey estimated that "probably more persons lost their lives by fire at Tokyo in a 6-hour period than at any time in the history of man."
- The destruction of 62 other Japanese cities. Only Hiroshima and Nagasaki were spared -- reserved for a different sort of horror. In sum, more than a million Japanese civilians were killed. LeMay himself would admit years later, "I suppose if I had lost the war, I would have been tried as a war criminal. Fortunately, we were on the winning side."
- The bombing of North Korean cities, dams, villages and rice paddies. Civilian deaths: more than two million.

In short, with the enthusiastic blessing of the American center, LeMay was directly responsible for the slaughter of about half as many civilians as died in the Holocaust. To this day, establishment Washington won't even face what happened at Nagasaki or Hiroshima, let alone the far larger massacres occurring under the command of LeMay.

And LeMay had even grander schemes. His plan for defeating the Soviet Union included the obliteration of 70 Soviet cities in thirty days with thirty-three atomic bombs and the deaths of 2.7 million citizens.

To be sure, those vocally uneasy back then with the presumptions and power of SAC were not called paranoids. They were just called Commies and dupes.

Wannabes

Let's pause for another body count. From the time I first began looking into citizen militias, I have watched assiduously for certifiable acts of violence. Not talk, not war-games, not uniforms. But action. What I've found is a few threats, beatings and hair-brained schemes like stealing tanks from an army base. There's some bad stuff, to be sure, but in aggregate the sort of thing that wouldn't even make a daily's front page if instigated by one of the urban militias, that is to say a gang.

Not even the Oklahoma bombing, from what has been revealed to date, can be pinned on the militias. So far, the worst the militias can be accused of in this case is guilt by attendance.

Tim McVeigh -- who has been found guilty by the media, although not by the law -- seems to have met those of his ilk mainly at gun shows. And if there is any violent link among the suspects it is with a military organization called the US Army, which teaches men such unmarketable skills as how to kill large numbers of people quickly and then returns them to a civilian world in which they can't find a job. Despite the ads on television, the unemployment rate of veterans 20-24 years old is twice that of those who have not had the benefit of Army training.

Besides, the militias seem largely manned by wannabes. Former Green Beret Gregory Walker, who is writing a book about terrorism and anti-terrorism, told Pacific News Service:

> Today, the militia movement rates about 1.5 on a scale of 1 to ten in which one is completely benign . . . It's made up primarily of law-abiding citizens who make no attempt to conceal their identities or [ideology] and who are so desperate for real military training they put want-ads in the newspaper . . . Eighty percent of militia members have no military experience, and just an infinitesimally small percentage have any kind of combat experience. The rest are the butchers, the bakers and the candlestick makers, the guys who ran the computers and fixed truck tires. . . . That's why the militia's are so desperate to hire trainers -- and why they end up hiring bunko artists in a lot of cases because very few real-deal military would get involved.

The narrow window of normalcy

Let's pause now for some argument by anecdote. To understand the establishment's fear of the rest of the country, it helps to understand how narrow is its definition of normalcy. A minor, but telling example, came earlier this year when I was bounced from the lineup for a TV show about the DC fiscal crisis after the host, Derik McGinty, found that I still supported DC statehood. In some pique, McGinty said, "Don't you know, Sam, that puts you out of the loop?"

I replied that I had been out of the loop for about 30 years, but that I did try to do right. I didn't mention that probably a majority of DC voters agreed with me, but that wouldn't have mattered much anyway. The loop is not for voters, but for those who decide things.

It's not hard to bump up against the Washington consensus. During 1992 primary season. I was walking down 15th Street when I ran into Don Graham, the publisher of the *Washington Post*. Graham asked whom I was supporting for president. I said I was backing Jerry Brown. Graham immediately grabbed my arm and started waving it in the air as he shouted something to the effect of "Look, everyone, I've found a real, live Jerry Brown supporter! Look!"

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> On the same day, the *Washington Post* ran a story headlined TWO YEARS AFTER FOSTER'S DEATH, CONSPIRACY THEORIES THRIVE while the *Washington Times* ran a story that began: "Henry C. Lee, a noted forensic scientist hired last month by Whitewater prosecutors to review the death of White House deputy Counsel Vincent W. Foster Hr., said yesterday that his inquiry remains in the early stages and he has a 'long, long way to go.'"

Brown, at the time, was the second choice of the country's Democratic voters. That, in Washington, wasn't good enough. No one in Washington who mattered supported Jerry Brown.

Such anecdotes may help to explain how the *New York Times* can write a front-page story -- headlined CONSPIRACY THEORIES' IMPACT REVERBERATES IN LEGISLATURES -- that treated an historic debate over the Tenth Amendment (guaranteeing the rights of the states and the people) as some sort of right wing plot.

The historic and constitutional ignorance displayed by the "paper of record" produced a piece as bizarre as if it were to be suggested that the separation of church and state was a scheme dreamed up by President Assad.

As with Kelly and his taxonomy of paranoids, the *Times* even went so far as to link those concerned about the Tenth Amendment with those who think the numbers painted on the back of Indiana highway signs are signals to invading UN troops.

Similarly, CBS News ran a piece attacking the fully informed jury movement (of which your editor is a supporter) as evidence of a right wing assault on the judiciary. In fact, the idea that a jury has the right to judge both the law and the facts goes back to the trials of William Penn and Peter Zenger, was supported by a number of the country's founders and early judges, and has been most recently applied to the benefit of the likes of Marion Barry and Abbie Hoffman.

Black helicopters

We now pause for the really good stuff: black helicopters. You see, we are told, not only does the paranoid right believe in the Tenth Amendment and jury rights: it believes in black helicopters.

The greatest power of the mass media is the power to ignore. As angst mounts in the heartland, however, and as alternative mass media like the Internet gain significance, the elites are losing their ability to decide what exists and what is merely a fiction of our imagination. Implicit in the mass media ridicule is a rising anger over its loss of control of the agenda. In the old days, issues like proportional representation, the fully informed jury movement, or the shorter work-week would never see the light of day. Now, however, whole movements can arise without the assistance of the *Post* or the *Times*, something that is regarded in establishment circles as truly aggravating. I suspect, in fact, that much of the media's angst about sex on the Internet is really little more than a foil for a far deeper concern: massive competition.

The black helicopters are a trivial but interesting case in point. It is standard fare for journalists to make fun of the idea of unmarked black helicopters. Yet there is evidence -- newspaper accounts, intelligence sources and so forth -- that such craft do exist. In all probability their ubiquity -- although not necessarily details of color and markings -- can be explained by this country's growing assumption that it can conduct surveillance on anyone it pleases, especially those who might be engaged in growing marijuana. Certainly a federal judge in California thought so; he found helicopter surveillance so intrusive and harassing that he enjoined its continued routine use.

And just one day after I had been jousting on such matters at lunch with a British journalist, and while engaged in giving him a tour of the city, he suddenly cried, "Look, a black helicopter!" To be sure, flying low above us was a dark whirlybird. Given the direction of the sun, I couldn't swear the craft was not dark green but it certainly was unmarked. I might, perhaps incorrectly (but without an iota of paranoia), have described it as black.

The whole business reminds me of James Thurber's fable about the unicorn in the garden. Upon informing his wife that he had seen a unicorn in the garden, his spouse calls the police to have her husband dispatched to the booby hatch. When the cops arrive, however, the husband denies ever having seen a unicorn in the garden and has his wife locked up instead. And lives happily thereafter. Thurber's moral could well apply to today's discussions of black helicopters and political paranoia. "Don't," he warned, "count your boobies until they are hatched."

To be sure there are those who see more than black helicopters, who believe that these craft are the advance troops of a UN invasion. But what service is provided to reason by the media pretending that they don't exist at all? Why not determine their function, color and so forth and point out that the UN is unlikely to invade with a staff and budget only slightly larger than that of the DC government? What's really going on here? Paranoiac co-dependence? Or are we seeing a more generic version of what often happens when government or defense contractor whistle-blowers speak out -- namely that they are sent to see a psychiatrist?

The myth-killers

One of the greatest myths of America's elite is that it functions by logic and reason and that it is devoid of

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myth. In truth, elites function like other people; they choose their gods and worship them. The gods, to be sure, are different. For example, many in Washington believe fervently in the sanctity of data, the Ivy League, the *New York Times* op pages and the Calvinist notion that their power is a outer, visible sign of an inner, invisible grace.

And some, even while professing to be without myth, spend their lives creating myths for others. We call them political consultants and ghostwriters.

There is no consistency to all this. The Pope's disastrous myths concerning birth control are treated with deference while domestic fundamentalism is ridiculed. Similarly, politicians and media created an instant mythology around the deaths of 15 children in Oklahoma City, but tend -- as did the *Washington Post* recently -- to lump the 22 children who died in Waco as among "80 group members," apparently as deserving of their end as was David Koresch.

What makes those in power different from other Americans is not the absence of myth but their denial of it. In refusing to allow room for the unknown, for faith, for those temporary fillers called theories that slip into the empty spaces of our knowledge, those in charge of America ultimately separate themselves from such natural human phenomena as myth.

As less of what should be known in our society is allowed to be known, the distance widens between those who have the knowledge and those who do not. To have any sort of decent relations with those Americans not professionally trained to suppress belief and imagination, we would need en elite with more poets and fewer economists. The poet understands that a myth is not a lie but the soul's version of the truth. One of the reasons so many stories are mangled by the media these days is because journalists have become unable to deal with the non-literal.

Consider the mythic underpinnings of the OJ Simpson saga. The average white lawyer or reporter sees it only as a murder case. But to many blacks, Simpson is carrying the mythic weight of decades of ethnic abuse under the justice system. In a column for Pacific News Service, a black journalist, Dennis Schatzman, outlined some of the black context for the Simpson trial:

- Just last year, Olympic long jumper and track coach Al Joyner was handcuffed and harassed in a LAPD traffic incident. He has settled out of court for $250,000.
- A few years earlier, former baseball Hall of Famer Joe Morgan was "handcuffed and arrested at the Los Angeles airport because police believed that Morgan 'fit the profile of a drug dealer.'" He also got a settlement of $250,000.
- Before that, former LA Laker forward Jamal Wilkes was stopped by the police, handcuffed and thrown to the pavement.
- A black man was recently given a 25-year to life sentence for stealing a slice of pizza from a young white boy.
- In 1992, a mentally troubled black man was shot and killed by LA sheriff's deputies while causing a disturbance in front of his mother's house. Neighbors say they saw a deputy plant a weapon by the body.
- Simpson case detective Mark Fuhrman was accused of planting a weapon at the side of a robbery suspect back in 1988. The LAPD recently settled for an undisclosed amount.
- In North Carolina, Daryl Hunt still languishes in jail for the 1984 rape and murder of a white newspaper reporter, even though DNA tests say it was not possible.

These examples would be rejected as irrelevant by the average lawyer or journalist in New York or Washington. What do they have to do with Simpson?

Only this. OJ Simpson's case serves as the mythic translation of stories never allowed to be told. The stories that should have been on CNN but weren't. Everything is true except the names, times and places. In Washington, they do something similar when stories can't be told; they write a novel.

Something parallel takes place when a militia member imagines that the Bloods & Crips are being armed by the US government or when blacks believe the same thing about the militias. Or when the UN is thought to on the verge of invasion.

Like urban blacks considering the justice system, the rural right has seen things the elite would prefer to ignore. It has observed correctly phenomena indicating loss of sovereignty for themselves, their states and their country. They have seen treaties replaced by fast-track agreements and national powers surrendered to remote and unaccountable trade tribunals. And they have seen a multi-decade assault by the federal government on the powers of states and localities.

Like urban blacks, they have not been paranoid in this observation, merely perceptive. But because the story could not be told, could not become part of the national agenda, they have turned, as people in trouble often do, to a myth -- and, yes, sometimes a violent myth -- that will carry the story.

The tragedy is that the American center has not responded to these myths by confronting their causes but rather with ridicule and repression. And by creating its own myths. In fact, to the American center, the militias serve much the same purposes as the United Nations and the Council on Foreign Relations do for the right. Just as once the establishment tried to define the civil rights movement by the Symbionese Liberation Army and the cause of North Ireland by the IRA, so Americans' concern over the usurpation of sovereignty at every level is being defined primarily by its most exaggerated manifestations. There is no wisdom and much danger in this.

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As author Walker puts it, "We've haven't seen a great peacemaker step forward to quell the fears and uncertainties. Instead we've seen a strong effort demonize people and polarize thought. Where is the person who can rise up and say, 'My fellow Americans' and truly be including all Americans. He's not out there, and she's not out there, and that's who we need to hear from."

In the meantime, when someone tells you about a some Americans who are paranoid or crazy, be sure to count the bodies. -- *Sam Smith*

Chiapas: changing the idea of revolution

Thomas S. Martin

According to the prophecy the "True Men," -- the heirs of the ancient Maya kings -- would come down from the mountains and the rain forest and free the people from their oppressors. The Spanish and their Creole successors have been in the south of Mexico for four hundred years now. They own all the land, they control the church and the government. The ranchers and village chiefs are closely tied to the ruling party, as are many of the private militias hired by plantation owners to keep the peasants in line. But the Indians and Mestizos of Chiapas, descendants of the great Maya civilization, have never given up hope of freedom. Now, in the last dying years of the age of Hun-Nal-Ye, the Corn God, that hope is being fulfilled.

The Maya calendar is a complex structure of interlocking cycles, based on the number thirteen. When all the cycles come round simultaneously to thirteen -- an event that happens every five thousand years or so -- one creation ends and another is born. The present world of the Hun-Nal-Ye began on August 13, 3114 BC. All of Mayan history -- indeed, most of recorded human history -- has unfolded during that cycle. But on December 23, 2012 -- only seventeen years from now -- this age will end, and the world will be created anew. Many of the poor and oppressed of indigenous Mexico believe that Subcomandante Marcos and his comrades, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) may be the next creators.

Although rooted in a history and a world view peculiar to southern Mexico, the Zapatista revolt speaks to all the people of what used to be called the Third World. As the multinational corporations and banks consolidate their hold over the planet, aided by their servants in corrupt governments and international agencies, ever larger segments of the human race find themselves effectively enslaved. As seen from the boardrooms and presidential palaces, most of the people of the southern hemisphere -- and increasing numbers in the north, as well -- exist only to produce cheap and plentiful consumer goods for the North America, western Europe and Japan. The concomitant destruction of the environment and of native cultures and languages, the rising infant mortality rates and disempowerment of women, and the McDonaldization of just about everything, are considered merely the price of progress and a free market. In the five hundred years since Columbus misnamed the Taino and Arawak in the Caribbean, the project of homogenizing the human race in the image of Europe (or Madison Avenue, Hollywood, the Übermensch, it's all the same) has been devastatingly successful. But its time may be running out. The dismantling of the colonial empires in the 1950s and 1960s opened a Pandora's box of ethnic nationalism and separatism. We are now witnessing a new, perhaps final stage of that process: many "third-worlders," including some within the borders of Europe and the United States, are rejecting not only the hegemony of the West but the very roots of its civilization. Millions of people on every continent no longer want the "rights" or "democracy" promised by the Western canon. They want to define their lives and cultures for themselves -- they have learned that what the "First World" offers with one hand, it takes away with the other. They have lost faith in all the "isms" and are searching for a new and post-ideological path.

The Zapatistas, named for a turn-of-the-century Mexican rebel now remembered primarily for his prodigious mustache, are the vanguard of an entirely new species of revolutionary. The emergence of that species might have happened in Kurdistan or the Chittagong Hill Tracts. But the southernmost Mexican state, Chiapas, is as good a place as any. In Mexican Spanish, "Chiapas" has long been the equivalent of our "South Bronx" or "Appalachia," a metaphor representing problems that the government cannot solve and would rather not admit existed. Neither Marx nor Adam Smith, nor any other dead white European male, could have foreseen how the Chiapans would decide to deal with their situation. Since the Zapatista movement first erupted in January 1994 -- on the day that NAFTA went into effect -- it has shown little interest in "revolution" as the word is usually defined. Subcomandante Marcos has repeatedly called for local grassroots democracy, for handing power over to the people in a very literal sense. This stubborn refusal to attempt a political or military takeover, as rebels are supposed to do, has confused many people in and outside Mexico. Some radicals have accused the EZLN of "mere reformism" because it is willing to negotiate with rather than overthrow the government. These critics, however, miss the point. The

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Zapatistas are anarchists. They do not want to govern Mexico or even Chiapas; they do not claim to represent anyone but themselves. "We are not a political force," Marcos wrote in June 1995. "We are a moral force or a catalyst of new organizing forms, but our force is not organized politically." As long as they hold a bit of the Lacandón rain forest, and can speak out, the downtrodden people of Mexico and Central America will have hope for democracy, cultural survival and self-determination.

That hope is still alive, although in eclipse -- one hopes, temporarily. In recent months the EZLN has been forced to the peace table and has made contradictory promises, demands and concessions. The organization has a credibility problem: it claims support in other regions, but offers no evidence; it promised a national uprising if the PRI won last August's presidential election, but that didn't happen. The charge of capitulation was bolstered in January by the appearance of the bizarre "Third Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle." In this document the EZLN proposes a "National Liberation Movement" (MLN) to be headed by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, a liberal member of the Mexican establishment who lost a presidential bid in the fraudulent 1988 election. Cárdenas looks attractive next to such Gingrich clones as Zedillo and Salinas, but he is no radical. This was apparently a strategy to expand the rebellion into other regions and other classes by lining up behind a popular politician, but Cárdenas didn't take the bait. In June, Marcos proposed a National Plebiscite and invited other parties and coalitions to support the idea. He wants the nation to vote on radical reforms in thirteen areas: housing, land, work, food, health, education, independence, culture, information, democracy, liberty, justice and peace. The plan to organize this referendum is complicated, as perhaps it must be in Mexican politics, but again it opens the EZLN to charges of collaboration and reformism.

Yet despite their apparent inability to decide who and what they are, the Zapatistas are winning their war of liberation. Events may already have left behind the negotiators in the mountain village of San Andreas Larrainzar. Since March they have been talking under a flag of truce, while conditions worsen for the campesinos. Over the past century the Maya lands have been reduced by the continuous expansion of cattle ranches and plantations, leaving only the shrinking rain forest as a refuge. But in the past year the tide has turned. Indians and other peasants have reclaimed much of this stolen land. The government has purchased some of it for redistribution to the Indians, but more land is "squatted" every month.

Billions of pesos in medical and agricultural aid has poured in from Mexico City since March of 1994; the campesinos and the Maya take the money, but are no longer politically naive enough to mistake it for justice and dignity. The Zapatistas directly control only a portion of the Lacandón rain forest, but their political demands have rippled out across southern Mexico and into the Congress and the United Nations. The revolt was the central issue in last summer's presidential campaign, but since taking office Zedillo and his PRI minions in Chiapas have kept few of their promises. The phoniness of the electoral reforms is betrayed by the very fact of Zedillo's victory. In June 1995 the World Bank, satisfied with Zedillo's toadying, approved yet another huge loan -- $2.75 billion to bail out the floundering banking system. The beneficiaries will be American investors, not the Mexican people. Poverty, discrimination against native cultures, lack of educational and medical facilities, ecological degradation and an absence of genuine democracy are epidemic in rural Mexico. But Chiapas and neighboring states, with a wealth of exploitable resources and a large native population, are the crucible of what appears to be a genuine paradigm shift. All observers report a new pride and dignity in the Indian and mestizo villages, a new hope rising throughout the Mexican countryside.

The Zapatistas were the catalyst, but unless they can decide whether they are genuine revolutionaries or reformers, they will no longer be on the cutting edge. Both the Bush and Clinton administrations bear a direct responsibility for the situation in Chiapas. The North American Free Trade Agreement is predicated on the assumption that the United States, Canada and Mexico will be governed by capitalist and consumerist regimes, properly deferential to the needs of the banks and corporations. In the case of Mexico this means continued rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (a prize-winning oxymoron), which happily supplies oil, food products and cheap labor to its northern neighbors in exchange for investment capital and military aid. Democracy and ethnic self-determination, not to mention justice and human rights, are seen as unnecessary overhead expenses that can be profitably eliminated. The corporations who stand to benefit most from NAFTA are concerned that the anti-authoritarian campesino revolt be crushed as quickly and quietly as possible. Not only is Chiapas the fourth-largest oil-producing state in Mexico, but it also produces 55% of the country's hydroelectric power. More important, however, is the fear that the Zapatistas will strike a chord of sympathy among the billions of other oppressed cogs in the wheel of world capitalism. So far there is one EZLN; if it succeeds, there might be hundreds. It might be an overstatement to accuse the corporate/bureaucratic establishment of conspiracy, but the pressure it has brought to bear on Mexico in the past year is unmistakable and well-documented. In February 1995, for example, the press learned of a secret message from Chase Manhattan Bank to President Zedillo, calling on him to "eliminate" the Zapatistas by any means necessary as payment for the recent American bail-out of the plunging peso. Representative Marcy Kaptur (D-Ohio) brought the

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leaked document to the floor of the House. "Suggesting the killing of innocent people, throwing elections -- none of this seems to bother Chase," said Kaptur, who called the memo an "amazing, troubling document." At almost the same moment, former President Carlos Salinas accepted an offer to join the board of Dow Jones & Co. It remains to be seen whether the American public will pay any attention as the role of our government in the Chiapas conflict unfolds. But we had better. What is happening now in Chiapas is the wave of the future.

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The Weather Report

It is time once again for the *Review's* annual estivation. We hate to leave, because journalistic hunch tells us that the coming weeks may be among the most interesting and disturbing in recent American history. But torpor calls.

Since the 1992 primary campaign, the *Review* has been about the only non-rightwing publication to report regularly and critically on that assemblage of scandals known generically as Whitewater. Among non-right journalists, only Sarah McClendon, Alexander Cockburn and a few others have been regularly on the case. Those who still have the May 1992 issue might wish to review its Arkansas Flow Chart, which (while omitting Vincent Foster and Paula Jones) gave even at that early date the broad outlines of the Whitewater affair.

For such heresies, we have become something of a pariah in these parts. So much so that we have reached the point that in talking to folks in Washington, we no longer argue, we only bet. We have had few takers.

As the White House tries to spin Whitewater away, we will leave you with one story. Early in the Clinton administration your editor had dinner with, among others, a high White House official -- a lawyer. The conversation turned to marijuana. The lawyer said that numerous staffers had asked how they should respond to FBI queries on the matter. The official's reply was that they should remember that they would only be in the White House for a short while but the FBI files would be there forever. And what if friends or relatives actually saw them using pot? The White House lawyer's response: "If you can't look an FBI agent straight in the eye and tell him they were wrong, you don't belong here."

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